

The Relevance of Holy Week Readings: Collect of the Day (BCP 219) Lent 5/C
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Many years ago, as a child growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I would often hear about the lives of the saints during our religious education hour each week. One of the stories that I vividly remember is the story of St. Lucy. According to the tradition, Lucy was born of rich and noble parents in the 3rd century and was arranged to be married. Being a devout Christian who had taken a vow of virginity, Lucy was finally able to convince her mother to cancel the wedding and donate the dowry to the poor.

“Enraged, her suitor then reported her to the governor for being a Christian. According to the legend, she was threatened to be taken to a brothel if she did not renounce her Christian beliefs, but they were unable to move her. They stacked materials for a fire around her and set light to it, but she would not stop speaking, insisting that her death would lessen the fear of it for other Christians and bring grief to non-believers. One of the soldiers stuck a spear through her throat to stop these denouncements, but to no effect. Another gouged out her eyes in an attempt to force her into complacency, but her eyes were miraculously restored.” (Wikipedia) Many icons today show St. Lucy with her eyes gouged out, holding a plate with two eye balls on top.

After hearing this story as a child, I wondered what it meant for me as a Christian. Why was I told a story that took place hundreds of years earlier? Was I supposed to pluck out my eyeballs in order to show my faithfulness to Jesus? And what would I do if my eyes were not miraculously restored? Why were we being taught about the exceptional lives of the saints as if we 8-year-olds could relate those stories to our daily lives? Have you ever asked similar questions about the relevance of biblical stories of ancient times? Have you ever questioned the relevance of the liturgical acts and readings rehearsed during Holy Week? After all, how does Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday affect us today? What impact do these “holy days” have on our Christian Walk in the 21st century? This is the subject of today’s sermon. But first, I’d like to begin with Ash Wednesday which undergirds the objective of the season of Lent and Holy Week.

So here is the first question: What is the purpose of Ash Wednesday? Some folks think that it’s all about the imposition of ashes: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” However, the ashes are simply a symbol to remind us of two things: 1) our limited life on earth and (2) the need to rewire our brain by confessing and repenting of our sins against God and our neighbor. So, the highlight of the Ash Wednesday service is the litany of penitence which reviews all of the possible sins and thoughts we might have that can destroy our relationships and knock us off the path of compassion that Jesus called us to walk on. These include sins of pride, hypocrisy, impatience, false judgments, prejudice, and contempt toward those who differ from us.

The litany goes on to bring attention to our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts that causes a deep division between the haves and the have nots. Today for instance, 8 men have more money than 4 billion people combined and yet the single moms using food stamps are depicted as being the problem. We repent of our sins because they distort, destroy, or diminish the relationships God has given us. If we are committed to being God’s people of earth, then we must change the way we think. Repentance is the method that helps us gain a new perspective on the way we see the world. Repentance means putting on a new mind. The goal of the Christian religion is to become like Christ; to think like him. And this means to follow the way of love shown to us by Jesus. This means we witness to the truth, resist the dark powers of the world that are crushing the human spirit, and sacrifice our own comforts for the sake of humanity. These are some of the themes that are clearly emphasized during Holy Week which begins next Sunday. Let’s take a closer look.

Holy Week is the most sacred time in our Christian calendar. It begins with Palm Sunday when we commemorate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem; a time when the crowds welcome him, shouting Hosannas, and spreading cloaks and branches on the road as an offering. The people are ecstatic and express their delight! They have seen in the person of Jesus, one whose preaching is different from the other religious leaders of his time. He has blessed the poor, the mournful, the pure in heart, the merciful, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. They have seen him heal the sick and embrace those on the margins, including the lame, the lonely, the lost, and the left behind. In this person of Jesus, they have seen how compassion and truth can make a difference. And so they cheered him on and hoped for the best. And yet the Roman Government and the religious leaders in power were not impressed. Instead, they ordered Jesus to tell his disciples to stop shouting. But Jesus refused to be intimidated by those in power. He refused to go silent. As a result, he was ultimately arrested and put on trial as a terrorist. Sound familiar?

Although the blessing and waving of palms each year is an important ritual for us Episcopalians, we need to remember it comes with a responsibility. The waving of palms is an act of resistance to those powers of the world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. It is a symbol of our commitment to stand up for the truth, to show love towards those on the margins, to protect those being persecuted, and to shower compassion and mercy on all of God's people. You and I belong to the body of Christ, and God is counting on each one of us to help bring forth God's kingdom on earth. Jesus showed us the way. Our job now is to follow it.

The celebration of Maundy Thursday comes next. It is the holy day on which we remember Jesus' commandment to love by serving others. Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another" (John 13). One of the rituals that churches re-enact on this day is the washing of feet. In ancient times, this was a task that showed hospitality to guests. However, it was usually assigned to the lowest man on the totem pole. Yet, according to the gospel of John, it was Jesus who got on his knees and washed the feet of his disciples. It was an act of love, an act of humility, an act of servanthood, a realignment of the social hierarchy. While there is very little need for us to wash other people's feet today, (at least in first world countries), there still is much we can do to serve others. Jesus said: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15). So how do we give ourselves away in love? This is a reflection for each of us to ponder on Maundy Thursday.

All this leads up to Good Friday, which actually wasn't that good, especially for Jesus. We all know the story of the Passion of Jesus' death. We hear it year after year, and we know it by heart. Perhaps that is why many Christians no longer attend services on Good Friday. Because of this lack of attendance, the Episcopal Church decided to include the reading of the Passion Gospel on Palm Sunday which makes that service a bit confusing. I never thought this was a good idea but then again, the authors of the Prayer Book never asked me. However, let me point out two things in the Passion Gospel reading that I think are most relevant for today.

*First is the discussion about truth between Jesus and Pilate. What is truth? Is your truth as valid as my truth? "Truth is the property of being in accord with fact or reality, the opposite of falsehood." Truth is something that is in short supply today! Society once believed that truth was absolute, something that was universal. But in more recent times, many philosophers would say that truth is relative and that what you personally believe is just as valid as someone else's opposite belief. In addition to relative truths, we are now bombarded with fake news, flexible ethics, media manipulation, ideological framing, fraud, scientific fabrication, half-truths, false witness, mental cheating, and propaganda. What are we to do? As Christians, we must constantly be reminded that truth comes from God as revealed through Jesus Christ. At the core of this truth is LOVE. If it is not about love, it's not about God...for God is love!

*Second, the release of Barabbas is perhaps the most shocking part in the story of the passion for me. Why did the crowd change its mind and vote to have the criminal Barabbas released instead of Jesus? Were these the same people who once waved palms as Jesus entered into Jerusalem? "Always remember, the crowd chose Barabbas-not because they loved him, but because they hated the truth."

Rituals, such as the ones we embrace during Holy Week are important for the ordering of our lives. They form our identities, give us a sense of belonging, and help pass on wisdom, beliefs, and values across the generations. These biblical readings remind us that it takes great moral and spiritual courage to stand up against the injustice, the inhumanity, and the oppression we often see in our world today. As the philosopher George Santayana once wrote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Since I will be with you on Easter Sunday, I will not speak today about the relevance of the Easter Vigil and the Day of Resurrection for the 21st century. These celebrations are truly the highlights of Holy Week. But in the meantime, since you already know the end of the story, I encourage you to hold onto hope. Hope is the conviction that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present. Do not let the chaos and darkness going on in our country today paralyze you or lead you into despair. Instead, saturate yourselves in the reading of Scripture. Pray for your loved ones, for yourself, and for the lonely, the lost, and the left behind. Witness to love and mercy, truth and justice. And finally, go out into the world and shower your neighbor with loving acts of kindness and service.

"Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Collect BCP 219)